

In My Words

**By Michelle Lewis, Step-daughter of Charles “Mike” Morrison who was killed in a trench cave-in in May, 2005 in Pinellas County, Florida
January 23, 2006**

My sister, Alicia, called me mid-morning on May 12th. She was crying but trying to remain calm. “You should sit down. There has been a horrible tragedy. Mike was at work,” she started to say. “Is he alright?” I pleaded, hearing the terror in her voice. “No,” she cried. “He didn’t make it!” I hit the ground, my head spinning in disbelief and screamed “No, not Mike! Don’t take Mike from us.” I desperately called my mother and told her we were going to get to her immediately. She was in shock, barely able to speak and in a world of unimaginable pain. The love of her life, the man she had spent every day for the last thirteen years with, had just been taken from her.

I called my two youngest sisters and told them I needed to see them right away. “Please don’t tell me bad news over the phone,” Jen asked. Fifteen minutes later, we met outside the bank where Julie was working. I held my sisters as we cried together in the courtyard. Hours later, we were headed from Vermont to get the first flight to our mother.

Looking back, it is hard to comprehend how we got through the following days. Mostly, we wept and did everything we could to comfort our mom, an impossible mission. I will never forget the sound of her wails, interspersed with quiet, tear filled prayers to bring Mike back. She lay in bed; clutching the clothes he wore the night before he was killed. Our mom slept with these for months, next to their wedding photographs and a box of tissues that was empty each morning.

We watched the news and read the papers. We saw the photo of our dear step-dad lying near the trench that he died in, with rescuers praying over his body. We talked to police officers, medical examiners and Mike’s co-workers in an attempt to understand what happened. How could Mike have lost his life at just 48 years old? He was strong, skilled and one of the most respected plumbers in Pinellas County. That Thursday morning, our mom and Mike talked about their retirement dreams and what they would have for dinner. “Give me a kiss goodbye, my prince,” my mom asked. How could Mike have gone to work just miles away, never to return?

We prepared special mementos to bring to the funeral home to leave with Mike; a bottle of water from the pool, one of his favorite utensils from the nightly grilling they did, photographs of his loving family, friends and pets, a John Wayne movie, his Buccaneers cup, one of my mom’s t-shirts she wore when planting the rose bushes Mike bought for her each mother’s day. We collected these things in Mike’s Gator’s lunch bag and drove together to do the unthinkable; to view Mike’s body and to say goodbye.

Mike’s brother and sister-in-law met us there. Mike’s brother looks and sounds so much like him. He should not have lost his brother like this. Our mother should not have lost her husband and best friend. She stroked Mike’s hair and cried as we gathered around

him and told him how much we loved him. We should not have lost our step-dad who was so adoring and proud of us. He would have been the best grandfather someday. Our mother did not want to leave Mike's side and walk out of the funeral home. At that moment, I imagine, if mom could have closed her eyes and gone with him, she would have.

We drove down Belcher Road to head home and unknowingly passed the work-site where Mike died. With what very little strength my mother had left, she somberly said, "Turn back. I need to go there." Reluctantly, we walked through the marina parking lot; a grieving widow, four daughters and two son-in-laws. The sun beat on us. I wondered how Mike and so many others could work in such heat for so many years. There were footprints in the ground; maybe they were some of Mike's last steps. We rounded the corner and saw the police tape blowing in the subtle breeze, surrounding the trench that collapsed on Mike. We tried to stop our mom from going any closer, but it was something she had to do. Embedded in the dirt was one of Mike's work boots. My mom sobbed and shook as her knees gave out. We embraced her and cried together. As tears rolled down my face, I saw the oxygen tube and a shovel in the earth near Mike's boot.

Later we would learn that these were thrown to Mike by rescuers who were faced with a terrible challenge. Fearful that the trench would collapse again, firefighters were ordered out and Mike was left alone to put on an oxygen mask and to dig. He was buried up to his waist with broken ribs and pelvis from the impact of one wall caving in and pinning him against the other. He told those around him he thought his back was broken and he asked for help. Mike was conscious, but he was internally bleeding to death. Within a half an hour, he was gone, still pinned in the trench that took his life.

My mom was working nearby at an elementary school when she was called into the office. She did not understand why. "I have children to see now," she stated. "You have to come with us," the nurse told her. Two police officers waited there to deliver the news. Mom thought it was a mistake, that it couldn't be true, until they gave her Mike's wedding ring and his soil-filled wallet. Her soul mate was gone.

The Occupational and Health Administration cited Mike's employer, B&B Plumbing, with five violations. The nine-foot trench was not inspected or secured properly before Mike and others were sent into it. No sloping, shoring or shielding was provided, which is required by OSHA for any trench deeper than five feet. B&B was fined \$21,000 by federal officials. Is this a serious consequence? Will this help employers learn to protect their employees from harm? When thinking about my family's loss, this fine seems disproportionate and absurdly inadequate, but nothing can bring Mike back to us. Our pain will never go away; neither will the images of Mike's death that haunt us. I can only hope that people will learn from Mike's death and will take every measure imaginable to ensure the safety of workers.

My sisters, mother and I have felt compelled to stop at work-sites as we have passed them in recent months. We have shared Mike's story with friends and strangers. We want to honor Mike and to remind people to be safe at any cost. To my family, Mike is a hero.

He died providing for his wife and family and ultimately teaching others to be safe. He gave my mother the happiest times of her life, as she gave to him. My mother often says with sadness in her eyes and longing in her heart, "This never should have happened to Mike." She is right. Mike's death was preventable, as most trench collapses are.

Somehow, my mom tries to go on. It is a struggle that words cannot express. This year, we will continue to mourn the loss of a great man, a hard-working man who cherished my mom and his family, adored his cats and liked to take walks at Seminole Park. We will find happiness in our memories and strength from kind friends and family around us. We will pray for the safety of workers everywhere and we will continue to share Mike's story to advocate for safe working conditions. That's what Mike would want.